To Helms, nothing hurt —if it remained secret

THE MAN WHO KEPT SECRETS: Richard Helms and the CIA. By Thomas Powers. Knopf. $12.95.

By Daniel Schorr

"THEY do not tell anecdotes about Helms; there aren't any. . . ."

"Helms said nothing at all (during a CIA post-mortem on a disastrous covert operation against Sukarno in Indonesia), just nodded his head. . . ."

Helms "said nothing (when the National Security Council met, on President Eisenhower's instructions, to plan the overthrow of Fidel Castro) but . . . listened carefully, often inspecting his carefully manicured fingernails. . . ."

Helms was sometimes observed, while presiding over the U.S. Intelligence Board, discussing developments in the Communist world, "staring dreamily into space. . . ."

WHO, AND WHAT, is Richard Helms, who tiptoed so lightly through 30 years of the CIA's history, yet left such heavy footprints that he was banished to Iran by President Nixon, became the prime target of congressional investigation of his agency's misdeeds, and eventually had to plea-bargain his way out of a perjury investigation?

The question is raised but never fully answered in this diligent but inconclusive biography of one of the most elusive Americans of modern times. Thomas Powers talked to every willing witness who had dealt with Richard Helms, but they didn't know much about him, either. In the end, "the man who kept secrets"—from the public, from Presidents, from Congress—succeeded in keeping his secret from his biographer.

Powers' arduous effort to pierce the veil of ambiguity and disingenuousness that surrounds his subject is fascinating. A good circumstantial case is advanced that, unlike his reputation, Helms was more a master bureaucrat than master spy—cautious, plodding, attentive to administrative detail, protecting his agency's and his own flank.

Helms emerges from these generally sympathetic pages as a product of his time and the secret institution he served. Thus, he worked on high-risk covert operations when ordered to, but tried to put brakes on them. Under White House and Pentagon pressures, he tampered with intelligence reports on Vietnam to meet political requirements. In disputes between his subordinates, he ducked making decisions. His own principle seemed to be serving his masters and avoiding collisions with higher authority.

And—oh, yes—making sure that everything stayed secret, for nothing was harmful as long as it remained unknown. If there was a Helms mystique, it was that what remained hidden did not exist. To keep his secrets, Helms would dissimulate or, if necessary, lie under oath. Once secret-keeping became a way of life, it was easy.

BUT HOW, THEN, can one rely on anything written about Helms—even the extent of his cooperation in this biography? For example, Powers writes that the former CIA chief "surrendered four long mornings" to be interviewed. But when I asked Helms about it, he scoffed that he had spent little time with the writer, had talked to him only to make technical corrections, and had given him no information of substance.

Indeed, the internal evidence of the book is that most of Helms' personal contributions took the form of denials and repudiations—just as with more official interrogators. The only direct quotation of any substance from Helms is his disavowal of the suggestion in John Ehrlichman's *roman a clef*, "The Company," that the former CIA chief blackmailed Nixon into suppressing evidence of his complicity in an assassination by threatening to expose Watergate.

"I never blackmailed Nixon in any form, manner or kind," Helms is quoted, "And I'd like that to be very clear. And nobody can prove anything to the contrary because nothing to the contrary ever happened."

The vehemence of the disclaimer reminds one of how emphatically—and how narrowly—Helms denied, in 1975, that the CIA had been "responsible" for assassinating any foreign leader. It turned out, in the report of a Senate committee, that the CIA had been directly involved in several abortive plots, and indirectly involved in seven real assassinations, even if not specifically "responsible" for a successful murder.

BUT LACKING congressional subpena power, Powers is left to surmise what really happened between Nixon and Helms—that, perhaps, "Ehrlichman only embellished on the fears of Nixon, who felt so threatened by what Helms knew that he assumed a threat where no threat was made."

Well, perhaps, but who knows? One puts down this book—filled out with an excellent, if not always pertinent history of the CIA and its transgressions—with a deeper understanding of what makes Helms a riddle, but not with the answer to the riddle.

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Daniel Schorr broke the news about CIA involvement in assassinations of foreign leaders when he was a CBS correspondent in 1975, and a year later handed a secret House intelligence committee report over to the Village Voice. He is now a National Public Radio commentator.

Powers writes that "war corrupts, and secret war corrupts secretly." He might add, "And secrecy itself ultimately corrupts." For I suspect that Richard Helms could not tell the truth about himself if he wanted to.

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